

Ayahuasca Imagery and the Therapeutic Property of the Harmala Alkaloids

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The author draws attention to the fact that the most typical visions induced by ayahuasca or yagé — snakes, tigers, and birds of prey — are components of the mystical dragon, and proposes that the dragon is a most suitable symbol for the mental atmosphere induced by the drink. Furthermore, the paper claims that it is no coincidence that dragon and snake have been traditional symbols for the phenomenon that Hindu Tantrism calls *kundalini*, characterized by the flow of *prana* or bioenergy, visions, numinosity, inner guidance and healing: ayahuasca heals — the author proposes — precisely through “*kundalini* arousal.”

Though the word “Ayahuasca” has not been used so often as “yagé” in English publications (in reference to *Banisteriopsis caapi* and the drink made out of it by South American Indians), yet its meaning — “vine of the dead” or “vine of the soul” — makes it more appropriate in the title of this paper in view of its content, as will be seen throughout the following.

My own involvement with the study of Ayahuasca and the Ayahuasca experience began in 1962 when — stimulated by what I had read about the Indian use of the plant and by being told by Dr. Schultes (foremost investigator of the plant’s botany) that he knew of no experimental study of the plant’s effect on westerners, nor assessment of its value to psychotherapy — I conducted a field trip in the Putumayo region of Colombia to collect information and plants. Soon after this, convinced that the effects of the *Banisteriopsis caapi* extract were similar to those of synthetic harmaline, I switched from the original intent of investigating the effect of plant extracts to the research described at the conference on “ethnopharmacologic search for psychoactive drugs” organized by Drs. B. Holmsted and Efron, the proceedings of which were published by H.E.W. in 1967. I reported on that occasion that the effects of harmaline are subjectively different from the LSD-like hallucinogens in that this alkaloid causes no depersonaliza-

tion or perceptual changes in the environment, though it shares with the hallucinogens the effect of eliciting visual imagery with eyes closed. I also reported briefly then on experiments with 10-methoxy-harmalan which showed that the effect of this substance, which we have all reason to believe is produced in the pineal gland, is comparable to that of harmaline — which gives the present subject added interest. Later, in *The Healing Journey* (1975), I proposed the expression, “fantasy enhancers,” for both the harmala alkaloids and ibogaine which they resemble in the elicitation of daydreams with the spontaneity of ordinary and even extraordinary dreams yet with no loss of awareness. An alternative might be *oneirophrenics*, a term suggested by Dr. William Turner, pioneering psychedelic investigator to whom DeRopp dedicated his equally pioneering *Drugs and the Mind*.

I have already discussed the main themes apparent in harmaline-induced imagery in a chapter of Dr. Michael Harner's (1973) *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, originally written as my part of a joint presentation given with Harner at the annual meeting of the Kröber Anthropological Society in Berkeley in 1966. It was remarkable to what extent Harner and myself, writing independently of each other — he on the basis of his anthropological experience and myself on the basis of clinical observations — coincided. While it might have been possible earlier to believe that some visions repeatedly reported by South American Indians such as jaguars, birds of prey and snakes were the outcome of culturally and environmentally suggested expectations, the reports of my 30 volunteers — devoid of expectations as to what their experience with this experimental psychoactive drug might be like — was a confirmation of an alternative interpretation: that traditional *ayahuasca* imagery is not only confirmatory of tradition but a spontaneous symbolization of a characteristic experience or state of consciousness elicited by the *ayahuasca* alkaloids.

Even though the regularity of snake and tiger visions in naive westerners may be regarded as dramatic support for the idea of a collective unconscious, the notion of archetype fails to explain *ayahuasca* visions in their specificity. Why these particular archetypes? This is a reflection I first undertook in an unpublished essay of the 1960's which I would have offered the *Journal of Mental Imagery* for this occasion if it were not the case that the invitation to contribute to the issue called for a shorter paper. I called it “Toward an Experimental Mythology,” wanting to emphasize the unique opportunity provided by the *ayahuasca* experience to observe the mind engaged in mythopoetic activity, to interrogate it on its products, and even interact with archetypal productions in their nascent state.

Woven around two specific cases, that early commentary on some *ayahuasca* visions concentrates on the big birds (an expression of freedom), the fish (flowing, or fluidity) and the tiger (power), and I suggested that, beyond these particular qualities, these animals express the sense of animality in itself, primitiveness and the instinctual aspect of our nature.

That animality, spontaneity, primitiveness and instinctiveness appear to be one of the significances of the "ayahuasca animals" is supported by the fact that all kinds of animals may appear in the visions, and not only dangerous ones — even though the latter category is both statistically and experientially the most striking. The great proportion of snakes, felines and birds of prey, however, clearly indicates that the state of consciousness expressed by the ayahuasca animals proper is not only one of proximity to instinct or openness to the voice of instinct, but one that involves an intuition of death, or an apprehension of deadliness — and this is in turn confirmed by the fact that images of dying and killing are, together with those of animals, another prominent theme of harmaline "dreaming" — as must have been apparent to the Quechuas who gave the drink its name.

As well as suggesting that the specific qualities of experience reflected by specific animal images (fluidity, power, freedom, etc.) point to a common underlying core experience (one of aggressive libido, I would add today), I pointed out in that analysis that the superimposition of the reptile, the feline's fangs and claws and the bird's wings (as well as the fish's watery environment and scales) results in the image of the dragon. Furthermore, through an examination of dragon myths and the content of subjects' reports, I concluded that the consciousness stimulated by ayahuasca involved an intuition of the inseparability of life and death, an apprehension of life as a self-consuming and self-devouring living-into-death or dying-into-life — and observed that just as mythical dragons may be symbols of good and evil, ayahuasca animals may be terrifying or friendly according to the readiness of the psyche to accept life-death or to reject, not only the "internal animal" but a greater Life, along with its deadliness and mortality (just as ordinary consciousness rejects it in its clinging to life and its aversion to death).

True as all this now appears to me, the experience of nearly 20 years causes me to regard this view of the dragon as Life — accepted or rejected, exalted or vilified — incomplete; just as I think Mundkur fails to be complete in his study of snake symbolism in the book *The Cult of the Serpent* (1983), where he never establishes a connection between this universal phenomenon and the experience that the Hindu Tantrics call *kundalini* — a word usually translated as serpent power.

What is this *kundalini*, symbolized as a snake or dragon, that is said to lie dormant at the base of our spine and to have the potential to rise until, reaching the top of the head, it brings about the highest state of consciousness?

The traditional answer is "God." *Kundalini* is equated with the divine within, and *prana* (which circulates between the chakras and out of them throughout the body in a rhythmical up-and-down and in-and-out movement) regarded as a divine force through which it manifests. *Kundalini* is connected to sexual energy, but not identical to genital sexuality, just as *prana* is related to breath and yet only analogically so, in virtue of its

being possible to stimulate it through certain breathing exercises.

Also, Reich's "orgone" is "cosmic" and thus implicitly divine, and the vibratory phenomenon that he observed in his patients and called the "streamings" was interpreted by him as the flow of an energy, a "bioenergy." (Apparently, without knowledge of *kundalini* yoga, Reich also observed a relation of this "bioenergy" to sexuality and breathing and described its release or expression in the body in connection with deep relaxation of body segments roughly corresponding to the chakras.)

As I have explained in earlier papers (Naranjo, 1973b, 1985), I think that the idea of a spiritual energy in the body is only an approximation and a metaphoric way of speaking, and that we may today describe *kundalini* specifically and objectively without loss of appreciation for the traditional (poetic and practically apt) alternative. It is not a spiritual energy, I have proposed, that flows in subtle channels (nadis) which do not belong in the gross material body, but it is rather the case that there arises *in conjunction* with spiritual states of consciousness, waves of muscle tonus fluctuation that give the impression of a movement "of something" just as the up-and-down movement of water in waves gives the impression that liquid itself and not patterns of movement are advancing. Whether we speak of a spiritual energy in the body or of a parallelism of mystical experience or *pranic phenomena* (to use an expression proposed by Dr. Grof), there is more than sacredness and "subtle physiology" in the *kundalini* phenomenon: along with formless numinosity and unusual body awareness there is what we may call contemplative or visionary (though not always visual) experience which may be regarded as a spontaneous symbolization of spiritual consciousness, and also an inner guidance and heightened intuition that is traditionally conceptualized as a connection with an inner teacher or guru — which has prompted Gopi Krishna (1970) to call his autobiographical account *Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy in Man*. What is meant here is something that propels us along an individual evolution, an inner guidance and force that assists our growth-healing-enlightenment process. The association of *kundalini* with healing is not only known in old traditions such as Taoism, Tantraism and Western alchemy, but may be regarded as the source of the widespread association of snake and dragon to medicine — as in shamanism and in the Greek caduceus — still the insignia of Hippocrates' modern successors.

Though it is the visionary and spiritual aspects of the *ayahuasca* experience that have been emphasized (particularly by the South American Indians), the experiences of "energy flow" in the body are well-known to shamans and pervade the reports of naive westerners. As support to my own memories in this regard (partly eclipsed by the descriptions of visions in my earlier writings), I may report that in a recent symposium in Germany (Leuner & Schlichting, 1986), two Swiss psychiatrists, working with harmine and ibogaine, respectively, failed to agree with my reported observations on

the stimulation of imagery production, and found the physical effects of these drugs (interpreted by one of them in bioenergetic terms) more pronounced. As for the issue of guidance, its centrality in South American shamanism may be illustrated (as I was able to learn during my field trip to the Colombian Putumayo) by the advice given by medicine men to those taking drink in their company — to the effect that they regard the snake in their visions as a guide. It is also implicit in the main reason sometimes given for taking yagé — as one Kamsa shaman put it, “to learn medicine,” which I would paraphrase as developing intuition, learning about nature, coming to understand dreams and progressing in the world of consciousness to the point of being able to help others.

In sum, then, my statement in this paper is that *ayahuasca* imagery may be understood in the light of the *kundalini* phenomenon, and that the activation of this widely recognized organismic healing and growth potential on our psychophysical system accounts for the traditional use of *ayahuasca* in healing (both mental and physical) as well as in the formation of healers. If this contention is correct, I cannot help envisioning how dragon, sphynx and phoenix myths emerge not only out of a mythopoetic consciousness but from a consciousness thoroughly familiar with the *kundalini* realm; nor wondering whether it was not the healing “dragon power” that inspired the artistry and visionary riches in the myths. The idea that *Peganum harmala*, similar in effect to *Banisteriopsis caapi*, could have been the source of soma, once suggested in a discussion with Gordon Wasson, has recently received confirmation in the research of Dr. Flattery (Flattery & Schwartz, 1986), and this strongly supports the likelihood of this possibility.

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